

I Give Up
2016 Ash Wednesday Reflection
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
February 10, 2016

Isaiah 58:1-8, Mark 9:30-37

"*I Give Up*" she said, clutching the diaper bag to her shoulder. It was only a chance meeting in a grocery store parking lot, but my young friend's words sure were real. "*This baby cries all night, there's nothing I can do to soothe her. I rock and I rock and I rock... I'm a loss for what to do.*"

What I said to her next was not really adequate; I can't remember the exact words, but something like "*You can't just give up! Failure is not an option! Hey, we've all been there.*" As a wave of sadness flashed across her face I wondered if she was looking for a different kind of support other than my standard 'Buck-up, Soldier' speech.

Later, as we pushed our grocery carts together down the aisles, a wave of empathy hit my heart and I thought of a better response. "*Here, let me take her for a few hours and you catch a nap. Things will be clearer once you've had a chance to rest.*"

Admit it, try as hard as we might not to be, we've all been there. Whether it's a cranky teething baby keeping us up at night or something more benign like finishing the New York Times Sunday crossword puzzle, most of us come to the point of acknowledging our inadequacies. It's almost inevitable and begins with three simple, powerful words: "I give up."

During the 40 days of Lent, Christians feel compelled to give something up. Most give up some vice or bad habit (you know, the A-B-C's like alcohol, booze, chocolate, caffeine or maybe my personal vice... Netflix marathons). The practice of fasting and self-denial is an ancient spiritual discipline.

Others, like my formerly Roman Catholic mother, argue against the idea of giving something up for Lent. She taught me at a young age that there's a danger in just going through the motions, giving up something superficial that won't really get to the heart of the matter. Come on... will the world change by any one of us not eating chocolate for 40 days?

On the other hand, if you want to give up chocolate, who I am to tell you that you shouldn't? I know what the Lord requires of me. Nowhere in

mercy, justice, and walking humbly with God does it include judging your spiritual discipline.

Maybe this year I'll give something up for Lent, I haven't decided yet. In the past I've given up social media (let me tell you, it was wonderful). One year, when the children were little, we gave up electric light in the house during Holy Week (including TV's and other electronics). Playing board games by candlelight was incredibly gratifying.

Giving up can be an easy thing to do sometimes.

But this year, I feel weary, and I don't think I'm alone.

I feel weary of a world torn by violence in Central Africa, Syria and the Middle East.

I feel weary of divisive politics.

I feel weary of debating.

I feel weary of the lack of sun.

I feel weary of social media, being bombarded every day by this post, this article, this meme.

I feel weary of my to-do list, which seems to be growing faster than I can check things off.

I feel weary of reacting harshly to my family when they don't deserve it.

I feel weary of the laundry pile in my kitchen, the paper pile on my desk, and the snow piles in the church parking lot.

And now Lent comes and I'm supposed to give something up, and I can't pick just one thing. What I really want to do is give up my need to be right every time, my need to follow the plan, my need to check every box, my need to fix everything.

Maybe that's it. Maybe there are other, more important things I can give up. And maybe you can too.

What if we gave up our failures, but still took the time to look at our shortcomings?

Or if we gave up depending only on ourselves, and took up our interconnectedness?

Or if we gave up the notion that we can do it all, but took up these important questions:

Did I offer peace today?

Did I lift someone else's burden?

Did I say words of healing?

Did I let go of my anger and resentment?
Did I forgive?
Did I love?

Tonight I remember that I was formed from dust, and will someday return to dust.

But in between now and then I am going live.

And I choose to live clinging to justice, mercy, and kindness.

Not because my personal actions will solve the world's problems, but because that's who God is. God is justice. God is mercy. God is kindness. God is love.

This same God took a pile of dust and breathed life into us, so how else can we live?

Alone, I can't fix everything. These ashes are a reminder of our own mortality and shortcomings. They are a reminder that God took a little carbon and formed something that I never could.

And that is a huge relief.

In order for our Lenten pilgrimage to have any meaning, our hearts must find a new place, a better place. As with the prophets, we may not be able to identify all that has contributed to this feeling of "being done", still we know that if we make the journey, and return to God with all our hearts, there we will find grace. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.